

## **Why am I not making myself heard? *Communication changes in Parkinson's disease***

**By Sara Andrew**

Speech changes are maybe not the first thing to spring to mind when a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease (PD) is received. The focus is often initially on movement, particularly the tremor so characteristic of the neurological condition. However up to 90% of people with PD will experience speech difficulties at some stage during the disease process. What sort of changes in speech might there be and when will they occur?

The most obvious and common difficulties with speech are often the volume and clarity. Speech can become quiet making social occasions, with groups of people or in noisy environments, more challenging. Speech might be slurred and less precise which again can make it harder for the listener to understand. These are not the only aspects of speech to be affected though. The speed at which you can speak may be reduced as well as the ability to change the pitch of your voice. Why does that matter? Well, both pitch and rate of speech are important in conveying those more subtle meanings in speech. For example, we often convey excitement about a topic by speaking faster, or ask a question by changing the pitch of our voice.

There isn't a strong relationship between the severity of the PD and speech changes that occur so it is hard to predict when in the disease process these changes may occur, but they are often worse in the latter stages of the disease.

Sadly, even before these changes are very apparent to the listener, they can have a significant effect on the confidence in communication of the person with PD which can, in turn, have a negative impact on their lives by reducing social interaction. It is also an aspect of PD that is not helped by the medication taken to control many of the other symptoms.

There are techniques and strategies that can be used and learned to help improve and manage these changes to maintain strong, clear speech for longer, and to help retain confidence as an effective communicator. Speech and Language Therapists are qualified to help with all of these difficulties and can advise and support, both the person with PD, and their communication partners, in their journey after diagnosis.